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ABSTRACT

A study of President Ronald Reagan's speeches reveals not only a President intent on "identifying directly with the people," but a spokesman adept at the use of symbolic communication as well. Probably the most obvious symbol of the campaign for economic renewal is the term "Reaganomics" itself. Referentially, it has come to stand for the particular policy objectives advocated in the President's recovery plan; as a condensation symbol, it means much more. Through the creation and nurturing of myths, and the resurrection of ritual and ceremony in the White House, the President has endowed "Reaganomics" with far more sublime connotations. Reagan is also effective in using the myth of the American hero and stories of the nation's origins; his skill in appealing directly to the people first to educate them, and then to motivate them to act, has proved immensely valuable in his efforts to mold the public's perceptions about the nation's economic plight. Moreover, shaped largely by Reagan's use of ritual and myth, the rhetoric of "Reaganomics" reveals substantial symbolic dimensions. It would seem safe to assume that symbols, myth, and ritual will continue to surface in the President's messages. (HOD)

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New Myths, Old Realities: The Rhetoric of "Reaganomics"

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Throughout his political career, one of Ronald Reagan's chief assets has been his skill as a communicator. Whether seeking election or promoting his policies once in office, he has proven himself a master of artful persuasion. So it probably surprised no one when Ed Meese, then the campaign manager of Reagan's successful 1980 drive for the presidency, told reporters that the President would take his message to the people as often as necessary in pursuing the implementation of the programs which formed the Republican Party's platform. Said Meese: "I think you will find a President who identifies directly with the people, who knows their concerns and will be keeping them informed about what he's doing and trying to do on their behalf. I think he will be a very personal President."[1] Indeed, with regard to the President's program for economic recovery, Reagan's personal involvement and direct appeals to the people have served him well.

Pursuit of his economic policies undoubtedly constituted the single most important domestic event of his first year in office. The President established economic recovery as his number one priority early in his term, and he remained committed to that priority in spite of the periodic emergence of other issues. Between his acceptance speech in July of 1980 and a September, 1981, defense of the Administration's policy, in fact, Reagan delivered no fewer than eight major addresses in which the economic program was either the dominant theme or the only theme.[2] Study of the President's speeches reveals not only a President intent on "identifying directly with the people," but a rhetor adept at the use of symbolic communication as well. An examination

of the nature of symbolism, myth, and ritual in politics, a description of the rhetorical strategy underlying the campaign for "Reaganomics," and an assessment of the functions of symbolic communication in that campaign should contribute both to our understanding of the role of symbolism in political communication and to our efforts to evaluate presidential rhetoric.

Symbolism, Ritual, and Myth in Politics

In the abstract, symbolic processes are "processes of signification that refer to realities other than those of everyday experience."[3] At the same time, however, language provides the capacity for "'bringing back' these symbols and appresenting them as objectively real elements in everyday life. In this manner, symbolism and symbolic language become essential constituents of the reality of everyday life and of the commonsense apprehension of reality."[4] Ernst Cassirer points to the general utility of symbolic expression when he observes that only "symbolic expression can yield the possibility of prospect and retrospect, because it is only by symbols that distinctions are not merely made, but fixed in consciousness. What the mind has once created, what has been culled from the total sphere of consciousness, does not fade away again when the spoken word has set its seal upon it and given it definite form."[5]

In politics, two types of symbols are prevalent. Referential symbols, according to Murray Edelman, are "economical ways of referring to the objective elements in objects or situations: the elements identified in the same way by different people." Condensation symbols, on the other hand, "evoke the emotions associated with the situation. They condense into one symbolic event, sign, or act, patriotic pride, anxieties, remembrances of past glories or humiliations, promises of future greatness: some of these or all of them."[6] Construction of both referential and condensation symbols frequently depends on the exploitation of two symbolic forms: ritual and myth.[7]

Ritual is "motor activity that involves its participants symbolically in a common enterprise, calling their attention to their relatedness and joint interests in a compelling way. It thereby both promotes conformity and evokes satisfaction and joy in conformity."[8] An equally important characteristic of ritual is its function as social drama, which involves the "structure and trappings of theatre. It is a public performance of a symbolic nature, often replete with costume and props."[9] And in American political rhetoric, the performance is frequently endowed, we are told, with divine sanction. Indeed, efforts "to elicit divine aid through ritual magic" abound, since it is "still believed that the 'help of God' can be ritually aroused in modern politics for the aid of one group or another."[10] Finally, the exploitation of ritual is most potent when it relates "communicants at a ritual to the 'symbolic umbrella' of the cultural order."[11] Essential to the execution of such a task is the linking of ritual to appropriate myths.

Myth and language are "special symbolic forms" which serve as organs of reality. They are "both resolutions of an inner tension, the representation of subjective impulses and excitations in definite objective forms and figures."[13] Political myth specifically manifests itself as "an unquestioned belief held in common by a large group of people that gives events and actions a particular meaning."[14] At least two related functions are served by these shared beliefs. First, they promote common bonds by creating and reinforcing a sense of community. By conveying "dramatic visions of the past, present, and future," they serve the "dual purpose of uniting a people while setting them apart from others."[15] In turn, political myths help relieve "sociological strain" within a community. Without them, "inequalities in wealth, in income, and in influence over governmental allocations of resources can be expected to bring restiveness; with them, potential rebellion is displaced by 'constitutional' criticism or approval."[16]

Ernst Cassirer maintains that the pursuit of criticism or approval is enhanced by the communicator's understanding and use of the techniques of the modern political myth.[17] Recognition of the change in the function of language is the first step toward this end. Whereas "ordinary speech" consists of both emotional (or subjective) language and propositional (or objective) language, the exploitation of myth requires that the emotional dimension supersede the propositional. The use of "magic" words is central to creating effective myths, and successful magic depends far more on emotion than logic. Next, new rites must accompany the emotive language. Special rituals are attached to most every political action, and success of the act is contingent on obedience to the ritual. Finally, anticipation of the future is critical. Appeals to the audience's collective imagination, generally by exploiting their hopes and fears, attempt to make vivid both the inevitable benefits of adopting a course of action and the certain doom in failing to do so.

Cassirer's conclusions grew out of his study of the success of Nazi propaganda in the 1930's and 1940's. As we turn our attention to the functions of symbolism, ritual, and myth in President Reagan's campaign for his economic program, however, it should become clear that his observations provide insight into American political communication in the 1980's as well.

"Reaganomics": The Rhetorical Game Plan

Appreciation of the symbolic dimensions of the President's advocacy of his economic recovery proposals is informed by discussion of two preliminary considerations. Since Reagan declared "that his economic program was the single most important issue of his successful campaign,"[18] it would seem appropriate to provide a working definition of "Reaganomics," which has evolved as a shorthand term to describe the "supply side" theory on which the program is based.

Predictably, both terms' connotations vary considerably according to the political perspective of the observer. Conservative columnists Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, for example, view the program as a revolution: a "radical and exciting new departure" from failed economic policies to an endorsement of "incentives to increase productivity for both workers and industry."[19] Walter Heller, on the other hand, sees supply side economics as "a kind of laetrile for the cancer of inflation."[20] When political partisanship is set aside, supply-side theory is generally understood as "the name given to the concept that instead of hampering business with taxes and regulations, the government should provide more incentives to stimulate the capacity of business and industry to produce."[21] The President's repeated and vigorous support of the same concept, in turn, fostered the evolution of the term "Reaganomics."

A second consideration warranting attention is the nature of President Reagan's role in the campaign. Although he governs largely by delegating authority on many issues, he has been a central player in the promotion of the Administration's economic plans. The day before the President's "State of the Union Message on Economic Recovery," Republican pollster Richard Wirthlin predicted that Reagan's role in marshalling support for the program would be crucial, "both in convincing a broad spectrum of the people that his program will work and in convincing Congress."[22] Wirthlin's estimate of the President's importance was borne out several weeks later when, while the President recuperated from the March 30 assassination attempt, progress toward passage of the initial budget proposal stalled in Congress. Lamented White House chief of staff James Baker, "It's not helpful when you don't have the President in person promoting his program. The Administration's single most important asset in pushing the program is the President."[23]

In particular, the President's presence was required to influence the public's perception of the nation's economic difficulties, while, at the same time, educating the masses as to what needed to be done. The first task was described as an exercise in "mass psychology." In light of mounting evidence that "public perceptions increasingly drive the economy," Reagan's objective was to "make a lasting change in those perceptions."[24] Education of the public became the means for change. In meetings with a number of big city mayors early in his Presidency, Reagan discovered that they did not share his assumptions about the future. Because of their apparent failure to understand the severity of the nation's economic ills, and because he feared that the mayors' viewpoints might be shared by a substantial portion of the public, the President's February 5, 1981, message on "The State of the Nation's Economy" "was designed to give the American people an 'Econ I' course in basic spending and taxing trends that he believes are not well understood."[25] Similarly, for his address to Congress two weeks later, written with the national television audience in mind, Reagan was advised to teach "some basic economics, that it is very difficult to turn the economic trends around overnight."[26]

Direct appeals to the people, efforts to simplify complex issues, and an emphasis on the urgency of the economic crisis characterized the educational program. When asked to identify the last American leader in whom he had "a good deal of faith," the President responsed, "Franklin Delano Roosevelt." In spite of their enormous ideological differences, Reagan admired FDR because he "took his case to the people. When the New Deal started, he was faced with a Congress that wouldn't go along. He went over their heads with the fireside chats... He took his case to the people, and he enlightened the people, and the people made Congress feel the heat."[27] Reagan was not only willing to address the people directly, but his "ability to strike a popular

response with the public" moved one skeptical economic analyst to optimism. Although the odds seemed against success, Alan Greenspan cited the President's communication skills as a key factor in advising his clients that the Administration's economic package "is the type of long shot I would put my money on."[28]

Also counted by his advisers as an asset is Reagan's fondness of simplification. To describe the enormity of the national debt, for example, he told his audience on one occasion, "I've been trying to think of a way to illustrate how big it really is. The best way I could come up with is to say that a stack of $1,000 bills in your hand only four inches high would make you a millionaire. A trillion dollars would be a stack of $1,000 bills 67 miles high."[29] And when he won a bitterly fought battle for adoption of a tax-cut plan, it was noted that he "plays President with more ease than any since John F. Kennedy and simplifies issues more accessibly than any since Harry S. Truman. The tax speech displayed both gifts at their magical best."[30]

Simplification of the issues is most useful, however, when combined with directions for action. Conveying the urgency of the country's economic condition became a priority from the outset. It was important. Reagan was told, "to get off to a fast start, to win some important victories in the first few months."[31] Thus, just four weeks into his term, he concluded a major policy address, replete with simplified descriptions of the state of the economy, with the following injunction, "Can we do the job? The answer is yes. But we must begin now. Our social, political and cultural, as well as our economic institutions, can no longer absorb the repeated shocks that have been dealt them over the past decades."[32] Notice that while this is a pledge to act, it is also an invitation for collective action. Such efforts to forge a common objective between himself and the audience not only help define Reagan's rhetorical technique, they also reflect one of the characteristics

of the symbolic dimensions of the President's quest for economic recovery.

Symbolic Communication in the Campaign for "Reaganomics"

Probably the most obvious symbol of the campaign for economic renewal is the term "Reaganomics" itself. It is at once a referential symbol and a condensation symbol. Referentially, it has come to stand for the particular policy objectives advocated in the Administrations's recovery plan: lower taxes, less government regulation, lower inflation, and a healthier economy in general. As a condensation symbol, it means much more. Through the creation and nurturing of myths, and the resurrection of ritual and ceremony in the White House, the Administration has endowed "Reaganomics" with far more sublime connotations: a prosperous and strong America, the superiority of capitalism, international prominence, and America as the "last bastion of freedom," among them.

Ritual and ceremony are close to the President's heart. In reviewing his first year in office, Hugh Sidey concluded that Reagan's "most enjoyable moment" may have been the viewing of fireworks exploding over the Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial on the Fourth of July. "He was ecstatic," a presidential aide told Sidey. Added another. "He is a ceremony freak."[33]

Beginning with the activities of Inauguration week, a conscious effort was made to re-assert pomp and pageantry into the conduct of the affairs of state; this, after four years of Jimmy Carter's equally vigorous efforts to rid the office of undue ceremony. In contrast to Carter, Reagan appeared genuinely to enjoy the seemingly endless balls and dinners.[34] Not surprisingly, both the setting and the theme of the Inaugural Address itself exhibited ritualistic manifestations. For the first time in history, a President

delivered the Inaugural Address from the West Portico of the White House.[35] The vantage point offers a view of both the Arlington National Cemetery and the monuments to Presidents Washington, Jefferson, and Lincoln. The shifting of the podium also symbolized a key theme of the President's speech: "Together--A New Beginning." As we shall see shortly, the memories both of our greatest leaders and of the common soldier, as well as the call for a "new beginning," were central to the construction of myths to support "Reaganomics."

First, however, it is appropriate to consider ritual's role in promoting The economic recovery program. Intent on portraying Reagan as a man of action, an objective previously discussed as a component of the Administration's rhetorical strategy, the President's "Initial Days Project" committee contemplated the presentation of a major speech devoted entirely to the economy. Eventually, they settled on a "State of the Union Message on Economic Recovery," a noteworthy decision in that it was to be the first State of the Union address by a non-incumbent since John Kennedy.[36] As with the Inaugural message, symbolic actions surfaced as a component of the President's rhetorical strategy to signal a "new beginning." Further, when progress toward the Administration's economic plans slowed in Congress during the President's rehabilitation, Reagan's actions provided the jolt needed to get the legislature moving again. His advisers viewed his return as an opportunity "to be pumped for everything we can."[37] After considering a radio speech or a televised appeal from the White House, they settled on the more dramatic, and ultimately fruitful, message before Congress.

The use of myths to elicit support for his program was as important as the revitalization of ritual. Specifically, at least three types of myths delineated by Dan Nimmo and James Combs appear regularly in Reagan's symbolic communication. First, foundation myths tell "the story of our nation's origins,

its struggle for independence, and the framing of the Constitution."[38] References to such events permeate nearly every Reagan utterance. In the Inaugural Address, for instance, his vantage point on the West Portico moved the President to praise George Washington, a "man of humility who came to greatness reluctantly;" Thomas Jefferson, whose eloquence "flames" the Declaration of Independence; and Abraham Lincoln, the study of whom allows one to "understand in his heart the meaning of America."[39]

For the President, Lincoln's contributions provided more than an understanding of America's heart; they constituted a significant source for the development of heroic myths, those which "surround the legendary figures of American politics."[40] Lincoln's life and example supplied model behavior to which even the President could aspire. In addition, Lincoln's pen produced lines which proved irresistible. In announcing his economic program on February 18 of last year for instance, President Reagan asked Congress "that we share in restoring the promise that is offered to every citizen by this, the last best hope of man on earth."[41] Though the President has described a number of proposals as "the last best hope" in the past year, he is in fact indebted to Lincoln in one other exceedingly important way: Lincoln as the model for the "common man as hero." When Reagan concluded his Inaugural Address with a tribute to Martin Treptow, an American soldier killed in World War I, he was establishing a pattern for subsequent discourse. The real heroes in America, we are told, are the average citizens, readily willing to sacrifice their own safety and well-being for the common good. Thus, the President, on his dramatic return to duty in April of last year, began his speech on economic recovery with a tribute to Tim McCarthy, a secret service agent who shielded Reagan from his attempted assassin; Tom Delahanty, a policeman wounded in the incident; and his press secretary, Jim Brady. Such citizens offer testimony

of the health of our society, and refute claims that we live in a sick society. "Sick societies," he contended, "don't make people like us so proud to be Americans and so very proud of our fellow citizens."[42]

The President used foundation myths and the myth of the American hero effectively. In both cases, his appeals not only had symbolic meaning, but they were relatively accurate in fact, as well. With eschatological myths, however, myth and reality often conflict.

Eschatological myths "project the nation's destiny on the basis of our past and present."[43] Given the tenuous condition of the United States economy at present, the President turned to the past for instruction on how to solve the current crisis. His search stopped in 1924, with the Administration of Calvin Coolidge. Coolidge's policies, constructed largely by Secretary of the Treasury Andrew Mellon, one of the nation's wealthiest men, called for substantial tax cuts, and were predicated on the assumption that the wealthy would re-invest their new-found excesses and produce a healthier economy for all. The President admired the policy's results: it produced, says Reagan, "probably the greatest wealth and prosperity we've ever known."[44] What the President ignores, though, is that such prosperity was limited to citizens in the upper income brackets. Farmers and workers, in contrast, suffered enormous hardships; and with no one able to purchase the goods produced by big business, the Great Depression followed.[45] In short, President Reagan seems blinded by his conviction that the era preceding the New Deal was America's economic "Golden Age."[46]

Conclusion and Conjecture

The Reagan Administration's single most important weapon in the campaign for economic recovery is the President himself. His skill in appealing

directly to the people in order first to educate them, and then to motivate them to act, proved immensely valuable in his efforts to mold the public's perceptions about our economic plight. Moreover, shaped largely by Reagan's exploitation of ritual and myth, the rhetoric of "Reaganomics" reveals substantial symbolic dimensions.

And what, if anything, does the study of this event portend for future Presidental communication? First, a good case can be made that the President, once committed to the primacy of a single issue, will see that issue through. He has demonstrated a remarkable will to finish what he has begun, and an unwillingness to allow his attention to be diverted. In whole or in substantial part, eight major addresses concerned the economy; no other issue received such concentrated attention.

Another predictable characteristic, as George Skelton, a long-time Reagan observer, has pointed out, is that with the President it "often pays to listen to his words almost as much as it does to watch his actions."[~~49~~ 47] As evidence, Skelton cites the President's pronouncements on the necessity to cut big government. On three occasions, addressing three divergent audiences, and with the given topic substantially different at each stop, the anti-big government theme repeatedly re-surfaced. To anyone paying attention to his words, the act of including government-cutting steps in his economic program would come as no surprise.

Finally, it seems safe to assume that symbols, myth, and ritual will continue to surface in the President's messages. Appeals based on the "common man as American hero" should be plentiful. And references to the lore and achievements of the founding fathers will abound. The issues may change, but we will almost certainly encounter opportunities, as Tom Paine implored his compatriots, and as President Reagan is fond of resurrecting, "to start the world over again." And when we do, no doubt our chosen course of action will be "the last best hope of man on earth."

Endnotes

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[2]The speeches included: "Republican National Convention Presidential Nomination Acceptance Address" (July 17, 1980), Vital Speeches, Aug. 15, 1980, XLVI, 642-646; "Five-year Economic Program for U. S." (Sept. 9, 1980), Vital Speeches, Oct. 1, 1980, XLVI, 738-741; "Inaugural Address" (Jan. 20, 1981), Vital Speeches, Feb. 15, 1981, XLVII, 258-260; "The State of the Nation's Economy" (Feb. 5, 1981), Vital Speeches, Mar. 1, 1981, XLVII, 290-293; "State of the Union Message on Economic Recovery" (Feb. 18, 1981), Vital Speeches, Mar. 15, 1981, XLVII, 322-326; "Our Economic Recovery Program" (April 28, 1981), Vital Speeches, May 15, 1981, XLVII, 450-452; "Details of Tax Cut Proposals" (July 27, 1981), Vital Speeches, Aug. 15, 1981, XLVII, 642-645; and "Additional Reductions in Federal Spending" (Sept. 24, 1981), Vital Speeches, Oct. 15, 1981, XLVIII, 2-6.

[3]Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, The Social Construction of Reality (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1966), p. 88.

[4]Berger and Luckmann, p. 38.

[5]Ernst Cassirer, Language and Myth (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1946), transl. by Susanne K. Langer, p. 38.

[6]Murray Edelman, The Symbolic Uses of Politics (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1964), p. 6.

[7]Edelman, p. 16.

[8]Edelman, p. 16.

[9]James E. Combs, Dimensions of Political Drama (Santa Monica: Goodyear Publishing, 1980), p. 20. Combs provides a fairly comprehensive introductory overview of ritual's role in political communication: pp. 18-41.

[10]Combs, pp. 24-25.

[11]Combs, p. 23.

[12]Cassirer, Language and Myth, p. 8.

[13]Cassirer, Language and Myth, p. 88.

[14]Murray Edelman, cited in: Dan Nimmo and James Combs, Subliminal Politics (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1980), p. 25.

[15]Nimmo and Combs, pp. 21-22.

[16]Edelman, p. 18.

[17]Ernst Cassirer, Symbol, Myth and Culture (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979), ed. by Donald Verene, pp. 253-259. Cassirer enunciated the techniques in a 1945 lecture.

[18]William Eaton, "Reagan Cautions Iran on Hostages," Los Angeles Times, Nov. 7, 1980, pt. I, p. 1; Rich Jaroslovsky, "Reagan Promises to Move Instantly on Economy Once He Takes Office," The Wall Street Journal, Nov. 7, 1980, p. 2.

[19]Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, The Reagan Revolution (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1981), p. 108.

[20]David Treadwell, "President's Grand Designs: Shrink Government Role," Los Angeles Times, Mar. 11, 1981, pt. I, p. 12.

[21]Treadwell, "President's Grand Design . . .," p. 12.

[22]Lou Cannon, "The Selling of Reagan's Budget," San Francisco Chronicle, Feb. 17, 1981, p. 22.

[23]Jack Nelson, "President May Address Nation to Push Tax Cut," Los Angeles Times, April 7, 1981, pt. I, p. 9.

[24]Thomas J. Moore, "Reagan Hopes to Convince Public that Budget Cuts Will Curb Inflation," San Francisco Sunday Examiner and Chronicle, Feb. 15, 1981, sec. A, p. 16.

[25]James Brady, quoted in: William Eaton, "Reagan Asks Drastic Cuts to Avert Calamity," Los Angeles Times, Feb. 6, 1981, pt. I, p. 1.

[26]Richard Bergholz, "GOP Feared Pre-vote Hostage Release," Los Angeles Times, Feb. 14, 1981, pt. I, p. 20.

[27]"First Family of the GOP," 60 Minutes transcript, CBS Television Network, July 14, 1980, p. 10.

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[31]Congressman Trent Lott, quoted in: John Averill and Paul Houston, "GOP Knows It Must Move Quickly," Los Angeles Times, Feb. 10, 1981, pt. I, p. 6.

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[33]Hugh Sidey, "Memories on an Anniversary," Time, Jan. 25, 1982, p. 22.

[34]George Skelton, "Speech Displays Enthusiasm for Nation's Future," Los Angeles Times, Jan. 21, 1981, pt. I, p. 15.

[35]Evans and Novak, p. 1.

[36]James Perry and Albert Hunt, " Start Up Problems," The Wall Street Journal, Jan 9, 1981, p. 15.

[37]"The Second Hundred Days," Newsweek, May 11, 1981, p. 22.

[38]Nimmo and Combs, p. 26.

[39]"Inaugural Address" (Jan. 20, 1981), 260.

[40]Nimmo and Combs, p. 27.

[41]"State of the Union Message on Economic Recovery," 322.

[42]"Our Economic Recovery" (April 28, 1981), 450.

[43]Nimmo and Combs, p. 27.

[44]Quoted in: Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., "Look! In the White House! Coolidge!," Los Angeles Times, Oct. 22, 1981, pt. II, p. 11.

[45]Schlesinger, "Look! In the White House! Coolidge!"

[46]For a concise discussion of the "Golden Age" myth, see: Lester C. Thurow, The Zero-Sum Society (New York: Penguin Books, 1980), pp. 7-9.

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~~[48]Cannon, "The Selling of Reagan's Budget," p. 22.~~

47 ~~49~~George Skelton, "True Believer Reagan Ready to Fight Congress," Los Angeles Times, Sept. 28, 1981, pt. I, p. 16.